

Your guide to sexual health and wellbeing

What do you know about...

Chlamydia

Vaginal health

Genital herpes

Gonorrhoea

Genital warts



healthier
scotland
SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT

**Remember, you can also
get an infection without
having sex.**

Published by NHS Health Scotland

Edinburgh Offices

Woodburn House
Canaan Lane
Edinburgh EH10 4SG

Glasgow Office

Elphinstone House
65 West Regent Street
Glasgow G2 2AF

© NHS Health Scotland, 2009

NHS Health Scotland is a WHO Collaborating
Centre for Health Promotion and Public
Health Development.

We are happy to consider requests for
translations in alternative languages and
formats. Please contact our publications team
at marketing@health.scot.nhs.uk or telephone
0131 536 5500.

Your guide to sexual health and wellbeing

Genital warts: your questions answered

Q. What are genital warts?

A. Genital warts are one of the most common sexually transmitted infections (STIs). They are caused by a virus known as the human papilloma virus (HPV) and are similar, but different types, to the warts you can get on other parts of the body, for example, the hands or feet.

There are many forms of HPV, some of which can cause cervical cancer. Genital warts are **not** the same type as those that can cause cervical cancer. Having genital warts does not mean that you have cervical cancer but women with genital warts, like all women over the age of 20, should have regular cervical smear tests every 3 years.

Q. What are the symptoms of genital warts?

A. Most people who are exposed to HPV will not develop genital warts. About 10% of those infected will develop visible genital warts. It can take weeks, months or sometimes longer after coming into contact with the virus before genital warts appear.

You may notice small, pinkish/white cauliflower-like lumps or warts appearing singly or in groups, around or inside the genital area. The warts may be itchy but are painless, although they may bleed if

scratched. You might see or feel them yourself or they may be noticed by your partner, or during a medical examination.

Q. How can I catch genital warts?

A. The virus lives in the genital skin but does not spread throughout your body. It is spread through skin-to-skin contact. It can be passed from one person to another during sex or close genital contact and by sharing sex toys. HPV can remain undetected on the skin and be passed on to a sexual partner without any warts being visible.

Q. What tests are there for genital warts?

A. If you or your partner are worried that you may have genital warts, see a doctor. You can visit your local GP surgery, or a sexual health service (for example, GUM or family planning). These are specialist services that deal with sexually transmitted infections, are completely confidential, and you can go to without having to see your GP first.

There isn't a test for genital warts other than what can be seen when you are examined. If everything in your genital area looks and feels normal to you, then you do not have genital warts. However, you could still carry the virus that causes them. If you develop symptoms, then you should go back to your doctor or the clinic you attended.

Your guide to sexual health and wellbeing

Other STIs, such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea, are more common in people with genital warts. Your nurse or doctor will offer a test for these STIs when you attend the clinic.

If you are having a smear test, this might show that you have the wart virus, even if you don't have any visible symptoms. Even if you do have the virus, you don't need to have extra smear tests.

Q. If I have genital warts, what happens next?

A. If you have genital warts, you will usually be prescribed an antiwart liquid or cream to get rid of the wart lesions. These can be used at home. Other treatments include freezing which is carried out by a doctor or nurse. Both treatments, although not painful, may be uncomfortable and may go on for several weeks to ensure the complete removal of the warts. Most people require treatment for at least 4 weeks but it can take up to 12 weeks.

Do not use wart-removal preparations that you can buy from the pharmacy, as these will not work on genital warts - always consult a doctor or nurse.

If left untreated, genital warts may disappear on their own. However, they may also stay the same size, or grow larger in size and number. They will also remain infectious.

Q. Are genital warts dangerous during pregnancy?

A. In some women, genital warts become larger during pregnancy. Often, within 6 weeks of the delivery of the baby, the warts will become smaller again and usually disappear.

Some treatments are unsuitable during pregnancy and treatment may be delayed until after the child is born. If you are pregnant, or trying to get pregnant, tell the doctor so they can choose a treatment that won't be harmful to the developing baby.

The risk of passing the virus to your baby, either during pregnancy or delivery, is very small.

Q. How do I tell my partner that I have genital warts?

A. Some people can feel upset, angry, frightened or embarrassed about discussing sexually transmitted infections with their current or former partner(s). Your partner will only know that they have HPV if there are visible warts.

Nobody can force you to tell your partner(s) about having an STI, but it is strongly recommended.

Your guide to sexual health and wellbeing

Q. How can I best prevent infection?

A. Always use a condom to reduce the spread of HPV – HPV can't pass through a condom. However, if HPV is present on the genital skin or in areas not protected by a condom, transmission may still occur. If there are visible warts not covered by a condom, it is best to avoid sex until the warts have cleared up.

The best way to prevent all sexually transmitted infections, including genital warts, as well as to protect against HIV and HPV, is to practise **safer sex**. This means using a condom for vaginal, oral and anal sex.

Safer sex

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can pass from one person to another through unprotected sex and sharing sex toys. You don't need to have lots of sexual partners to get an STI. However, you are more likely to have an STI if you have had a recent change in sexual partner or if you have had more than two sexual partners in the last 12 months.

Safer sex involves using condoms and dental dams for oral sex, and condoms with water-based lube for anal and vaginal sex. This helps prevent infections being passed on to your partner.

Condoms are available free from sexual health services, including GUM and family planning, and young people's drop-in services. They are also for sale at most pharmacies and supermarkets. Always use a quality condom that displays the European CE Kitemark.

For more information, visit www.sexualhealthscotland.co.uk or call the Information Line on 0800 121 4590.